



# Six Ways Coaching Accelerates L&D Outcomes



# Introduction

In preparation for the Future of Work, companies are doubling down on learning & development (L&D) investments in response to slowing unemployment and rising demand for top skills. In this new environment, coaching is proving to be a game-changer. More than half of industry professionals predict that coaching (peer-based or manager-based) will be the fastest-growing learning methodology for the next few years. This is because the true impact of L&D does not lie in isolated programs or one-off upskilling sessions – but in a holistic paradigm that places myriad L&D tactics (mentoring, hard skills training, regulatory training, coaching, change management, etc.) in correlation to your larger talent strategy.

This white paper discusses six action points that can help you to effectively position coaching within your talent development plans and leverage its impacts to enhance the returns you receive from your existing L&D methodologies. This will help organizations mature across the coaching continuum, going from a fragmented landscape where coaching is primarily driven by individuals, to a place where your talent strategy – aligned with your business strategy – drives coaching and propels complementary L&D programs with it. These pragmatic actions are essential, particularly in the context of hybrid work environments, as organizations reimagine their business models and upskill talent in 2021 and beyond.

## Taking Off in 2022

### A DECISIVE YEAR FOR ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

Prior to the pandemic, investing in workplace learning and evaluating its outcomes was already a top priority for most organizations. LinkedIn's fourth annual Workplace Learning Report<sup>1</sup> (WLR) found that more than 1 in 3 L&D professionals said they were prioritizing the measurement of learning outcomes. This trend will continue in 2021 and beyond, possibly gaining further momentum as there are new skill requirements in the post-pandemic world.

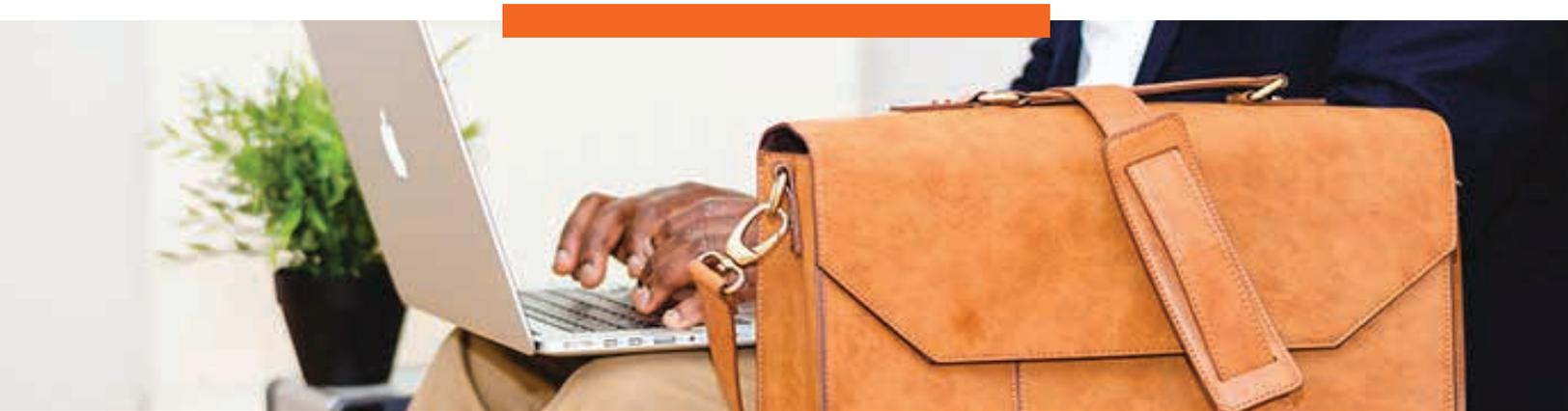
The ideal skill mix that companies aim for is also changing. Soft skills – such as leadership, creative problem solving, and communication – are emerging as the highest priority. This shift reaffirms the need for a coaching approach to employee upskilling, where you build an entire culture and workplace environment centered on talent development, as opposed to creating isolated talent “pockets.”

Further, existing L&D systems suggest that coaching already features into most learning programs – if somewhat informally. Fifty-five percent of the time, managers are the ones responsible for promoting learning programs, taking individual ownership for driving the initiative. Nearly half (49%) of talent developers mention that their number one challenge is getting managers to make learning a priority over the next two quarters. All of this data points in a singular direction – organizational L&D is fast maturing and learning professionals need new ways to strengthen its outcomes.

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The reality remains that there is no industry standard for measuring learning impact, making it difficult for organizations to quantify and achieve the requisite value from their L&D investments. Integrating coaching into your L&D roadmap first, and then eventually into your overall talent strategy, offers an answer to this problem, linking learning initiatives to genuine business targets – instead of just HR goals or compliance hoops.

Given that 74% of business leaders believe that “building new skills is the most critical part of rebuilding organizations post- COVID-19,” according to the WLR, it is essential that you move further along the coaching continuum.



# 6 Ways Coaching Accelerates L&D Outcomes

Companies still holding onto an outmoded coaching approach, used to primarily teach soft skills or prepare senior resources for corporate roles, are seeing only half the picture. Coaching can serve to reinforce the end-to-end impact of your learning programs in six strategic ways.

## 1. DEVELOP MANAGERS WHO CAN BETTER LEAD THEIR TEAMS

An important part of maximizing learning outcomes is to ensure the most optimal allocation of the new skills acquired. This is only possible when you have a well-developed manager at the helm, leading teams in a manner that is not fraught with micromanagement but is geared to empower individual team members to apply their skills to the fullest.

For this reason, leadership and management (57%) emerged as the number one in-demand skill, as per LinkedIn's report, outpacing other soft skills and all hard skills by a wide margin.

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You can leverage one-on-one coaching for leadership and manager development, providing individualized support and creating sustained behavioral change that traditional training programs simply cannot provide. Not only does this ensure appropriate distribution and utilization of the cumulative learning impacts in a team set-up, but it also positions coaching participants (i.e., team managers) to fulfill the expectations of your succession plan. Over time, **organizations can achieve incremental performance improvements in specific groups, extending into larger impacts for coaching neighborhoods**, and eventually building a coaching culture – thanks to a succession plan led by these newly upskilled leaders.

## 2. MAGNIFY THE BENEFITS AN EMPLOYEE GAINS FROM LEARNING SOFT SKILLS

It is commonplace for training programs to focus on specific hard skills that are in-demand, are relevant for a project/assignment, or are predicted to become necessary for the future.

Without at least a rudimentary level of soft skills, employees would find it difficult to manifest the hard skills as expected, thereby delaying/diluting your L&D investments. For example, a data analyst learning AI to train for the role of data scientist also needs communication skills to participate in meetings, brainstorm, and convey the results of problem-solving. LinkedIn’s report confirms this, with all three “highest priority skills” comprising soft skills. Sixty-seven percent of recruitment decision-makers would even hire candidates based on their soft skills if hard skills were weak/missing.<sup>2</sup>

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A coaching system equips employees with crucial soft skills, such as cross-functional collaboration, self-motivation, communication, attention to detail, persuasion, flexibility, and conflict resolution. These make it exponentially easier for employees to navigate workplace dynamics and effectively apply the hard skills learned. Interestingly, **soft skills also have a longer shelf life than most technical/hard skills, giving organizations a better “bang for their L&D buck” as it were.**



### 3. GET PARTICIPANTS TO EMBED AN ACTION THROUGH GROUP COACHING

It is one thing to learn about a concept and acquire knowledge. It is another thing altogether to embed an action and bring about behavioral change. Without a lasting behavioral transformation, your L&D investments will see diminishing returns, gradually giving way to the natural forgetting curve.

**Group coaching – where one practitioner coaches many people or multiple groups are headed by more than one coach – is excellent for behavioral change.** It can reinforce the intended behavioral impact of training programs by encouraging accountability and helping participants overcome the forgetting curve. You can initiate coaching sessions in the form of training follow-up so that the lessons last the test of time.

This tactic is particularly helpful for diversity, equity & inclusion (DEI) training, where the objective of employee development is to unlearn decades of systemic bias and institute positive behavior in the face of common triggers. Business leaders that invest in a coaching program side by side with more traditional initiatives – like anti-harassment training or bias awareness training – will see outsized benefits, as employees feel more accountable and responsible in front of their peers in a group coaching environment.

### 4. GAIN FROM THE SKILLS ALREADY AVAILABLE THROUGH PEER COACHING

Peer coaching has a direct impact on your bottom line by stretching the effects of learning outcomes already available within your organization. This is typically the case in stages two or three of the coaching continuum, once you have achieved isolated, individualized benefits. In the case that the necessary skills are present inside the organization – in a different department, team, or location – **peer coaching helps to spread its benefits at little added investment.**

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After initial coaching sessions, employees who are prepared, qualified, and interested in peer coaching can help their colleagues gain from diverse points of view.

learning of the employees in charge of coaching. Further, your employees are uniquely positioned to relate to and resonate with their colleagues in a manner that an external coach cannot. Peer coaching is particularly helpful as a post-training initiative, where employees who have undergone the same training program can follow up on the learning, check on the in-the-job application, and resolve doubts.



## 5. SOLVE SPECIFIC PROBLEMS WITH TARGETED OR “LASER” COACHING

At this stage of the coaching continuum, you have progressed far enough to be able to align individualized/ad-hoc coaching sessions with specific business goals. This could target a new employee who is facing challenges in the workplace, a newly appointed business leader, or a member of the C-suite looking to address an unfamiliar or multi-faceted issue. Ideally, there should be an internal/external practitioner or peer coach available at all times, or at least a designated manager as a coach to guide their team members. Any variety of problems, such as a creative block, last-minute meeting preparation, etc., could benefit from a laser coaching intervention.

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Apart from on-hand availability, you could also allocate a designated coaching allowance per employee per year as part of the larger benefits package within employee compensation. **Targeted/laser coaching would**

**help employees who are feeling “stuck” and unable to actualize their newly learned skills without any delays.** While this isn’t a developmental change as such, this methodology directly contributes to business value – with practitioners acting as “agile coaches” for success in the new normal – and helps to build a culture of learning.

## 6. UNLEASH EMPLOYEE POTENTIAL BY POSITIONING MANAGERS AS COACHES

This is a prerequisite for any organization looking to integrate coaching with learning and development. More often than not, managers are expected to act as informal coaches and steer employees in the right direction – this is true for at least 90% of organizations, according to a report by the Association for Talent Development.<sup>3</sup>

In a modern workplace (particularly in the new normal, as we face rapidly changing interpersonal dynamics), managers must do a lot more than allocate tasks or track execution. **Managers will be responsible for understanding individual potentials, nurturing them, and giving them purpose/direction.** That's why you need to formally position managers as coaches, aided by the leadership development investments you put in the initial stage of the coaching continuum. This will help you to evaluate managers' effectiveness as coaches.

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Integrating coaching with L&D lets you set clear coaching targets for managers, give them the necessary tools/skills, and measure outcomes.

These six action points will help organizations extract more meaningful outcomes and exponential value additions from their new and ongoing L&D programs. Given that L&D budgets are likely to increase beyond 2021 to support organizational recovery, this could have a massive effect on the extent and pace at which you achieve returns.



# Conclusion

## TALENT STRATEGIES ARE MORE THAN THE SUM OF THEIR PARTS

Embedding coaching in your larger talent strategy, and therefore your people strategy and your business strategy, can help you visualize the correlations between coaching intervention and L&D as they relate to organizational success during a period of growth or systemic change (depicted in the diagram below).

There is no denying that we are looking at a period of upheaval and transformation over the next few quarters, influenced by external forces (e.g., the economy), systemic forces (e.g., interpersonal dynamics determined by prolonged WFH), and operational forces (e.g., fresh compliance norms) simultaneously. Coaching can help to navigate these changes, helping employees to realize the benefits of all that they learn in the workplace:

**78%**

Of industry professionals found group coaching very or extremely helpful during change management

**78%**

Benefited from one-on-one coaching with a professional practitioner

**70%**

Gained from ready access to managers/leaders with coaching skills



Therefore, it is advisable to start with the change at hand, determining your business needs and reverse engineering your talent development needs to arrive at the ideal matrix of coaching and L&D, instead of stitching together a strategy based on the elements already in place.

**We are looking at a period of upheaval and transformation, influenced by external forces, systemic forces, and operational forces.**

Take stock of your mid-to-long-term business goals, keeping external, operational, and system transformations in mind. Link this to your people strategies and, therefore, your talent strategy, gradually breaking down its diverse elements to identify where coaching intervention could be helpful. This will help organizations move up the coaching continuum where there is a direct – and accelerated – correlation between learning investments and business success, amplifying your chances of success not only in the mid-term but also through future transformative waves.

## About AceUp

AceUp empowers professionals at all levels to maximize their impact through transformational coaching enabled by technology, empowered by science, and backed by data. We combine the power of one-on-one executive coaching, group training, and behavioral technology to foster a culture of coaching within organizations that drives systematic impact.

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**James A. Lopata**  
Vice President of Coaching  
Supervision, AceUp

**Belinda Tribley**  
Executive & Corporate Coach,  
Aclero

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.linkedin.com/business/learning/blog/learning-and-development/the-linked-in-learning-2020-workplace-report-l-d-taking-the-str>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.indiatoday.in/education-today/featurephilia/story/soft-skills-are-the-new-power-skills-1696768-2020-07-03>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.hrdiver.com/news/teach-managers-to-be-coaches-accountability-obstacle/585674/>